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Motherhood as Burden and Refusal: A Revisionist Feminist Reading of Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

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Abstract

Motherhood has long been a moral and emotional ideal in the discourse of patriarchy, which is often the highest achievement and responsibility of a woman. Nevertheless, modern feminist texts have started to question this ideal by pre-empting refusal, resistance, and physical autonomy. This paper will provide a revisionist feminist analysis of When I Hit You by Meena Kandasamy and will discuss how this story upsets the ideological construction of motherhood by making it a place of coercion instead of satisfaction. The study examines the operation of the expectation of motherhood as a form of control over the female body through the experience of the unnamed narrator, who is a victim of violence in her marriage. Based on revisionist feminism, body politics, and intersectional theories, the paper will state that Kandasamy rearranges motherhood as a negotiable and negotiated space, rather than an inevitable fate. The rejection of reproduction in the story is a form of resistance, which is rebellious against patriarchal power and reclaims the subjectivity of the female. By so doing, the text extends the feminist discourse by stating the politics of saying no to motherhood in oppressive formations.

Keywords: *Revisionist Feminism; Motherhood; Refusal; Female Body Politics; Marital Violence; Agency; Meena Kandasamy*

Introduction

In the cultural and literary mainstream, motherhood has long been defined as a horizon of female identity, unsuspectingly, as a destination that is natural and inevitable. This construction is further augmented by the Indian socio-cultural imagination, which links this construction with sanctity, sacrifice and moral completeness. The mother is not only worshipped but also transformed into an ethical ideal whose value lies in her capacity to nurture, cling and grant without hesitation. Never is this elevation innocent ideologically. Motherhood, as Adrienne Rich has eloquently argued, must not be regarded as a lived experience but rather as an institution, an institution that regulates the bodies of women, disciplines feminine sexuality, and makes the reproductive possibilities of women submit to the continuity of patriarchy. What seems to be a very personal and emotional sphere is, in reality organized in terms of historically contingent power relations.

It is this contradiction between the ideology and domination of motherhood that is being criticized by the feminist writing of today. Vegetating the earlier paradigms of feminism, which either romanticized the experience of the mother, or made visible its burden, the new feminist theory has started to pay more attention to the politics of refusal, to the possibilities of motherhood resisted, deferred or even denied as an imposition. This change is a great breakthrough for representational paradigms, which made the suffering mother the main

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locus of feminist critique. Rather, it prefigures the character of the woman who does not want to procreate, thus disquieting the long-held belief that reproduction is inherent to being a woman. This opinion may be reiterated in Judith Butler and her performative gender, where identity is not an innate property but a performance which is repeated and imposed as a norm, which, under certain circumstances, may be violated.

The book 'When I Hit You': Or, 'A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife' (2017) by Meena Kandasamy is a key work in this changing feminist environment. It is set in the intimate, yet extremely political, space of abusive marriage, showing how far the power over the female body is not only extended to the domain of reproduction but also to the realm of physical abuse. The unnamed narrator is not only muted with words and physically harmed, but there is also the implication that she has to accept the logic of reproduction in the marriage. Motherhood in this sense is not encouraged as a thing desirable and rewarding to a woman; it is a potential continuation of the domination of patriarchy, an instrument with the help of which control can be exercised and reproduced. The denial of motherhood, then, is not absence or deficiency but becomes a full-fledged and assertive opposition.

This paper places 'When I Hit You' in a revisionist feminist context to discuss how Kandasamy reinvents the concept of motherhood as a construct that is mediated politically. The concept of revisionism, as defined by Alicia Ostriker, is the rewriting of mainstream cultural narratives, where the dominant ideological underpinnings of those narratives are revealed and made vulnerable to other readings. Although much of the extant scholarship on the work of Kandasamy has centred on the themes of marital violence, linguistic agency, and Dalit feminist resistance, not much attention has been given to the implicit critique of motherhood as an institutional expectation of the text. The lack of motherhood in the story has been interpreted as an accident as opposed to a major political statement. This paper, though, suggests that this lack is not accidental or merely contextual; rather, it is structurally and ideologically at the heart of the feminist intervention of the text.

Through refusal predetermination, the story disrupts the normative connection between womanhood and procreation, thus disrupting what Sara Ahmed calls the "scripts of happiness" that direct women towards socially approved life paths. Motherhood in such scripts is both a fulfilment and an obligation, which makes its denial deviant or incomplete. This script is interrupted in the text by Kandasamy, who does not show refusal as failure but rather as a survival mechanism and self-preservation. By so doing, it redefines feminist agency, as it is no longer constrained to the paradigms of endurance and sacrifice that have traditionally dominated the representations of the lives of women.

This paper will argue that 'When I Hit You' is a revisionist deconstruction of motherhood, as it repositions it as a possible source of coercion instead of fulfilment and as refusal as a critical feminist tactic. The paper reveals how the politics of the female body is negotiated both through violence and resistance, and how the refusal to reproduce is a declaration of subjectivity in an oppressive order by a close reading of the narrative. With no mention of the suffering or sacrificial mother as in the literary traditions, Kandasamy presents an upsetting character, the woman who does not want to be a mother, thus disrupting the ideological underpinnings upon which patriarchal power is built.

The importance of the study is that it tries to expand the modern discussions of motherhood by changing the perspective of maternal work and exploitation to non-motherhood politics and non-compliance. In an era where feminist discourse is becoming particularly sensitive to reproductive agency, body integrity, and the entitlement to not be a mother, the text by Kandasamy provides a strong literary expression of these issues in the Indian context. With the introduction of revisionist feminism into the discussion with body politics and theories of refusal, this paper plays a role in the more fine-tuned approach to motherhood as a site of not only imposed and negotiated but also resisted.

Literature Review

The criticism of When I Hit You by Meena Kandasamy has, over the last ten years, taken different identifiable directions, the most prominent of which revolve around the issues of domestic violence, feminist opposition,

and politics of voice. A first reading of the text was disposed to read this as a narrative of marital violence and prefigured how the protagonist would break out of a stifling domestic regime by having a story to retell in the end. The way the novel brings into the limelight intimate partner violence has also been cited by critics as a structural rather than an isolated issue that puts the novel in a wider context of an order that is patriarchal and condones coercion in marriage. Through these analyses, the applicability of the text to the feminist discourse has been greatly expressed, particularly in the Indian context, whereby the problem of marital violence is traditionally covered with the cultural norm of perseverance and silence.

Late scholars have followed this research question by analysing the intersections of gender, caste and class in the works of Kandasamy. The intersectionally sensitive literature has maintained that the vulnerability of the narrator cannot be interpreted using the oppression lens purely in the gendered dimension but must be read in relation to structural inequalities that establish access to agency and autonomy. Critics have highlighted the uniform foregrounding of caste hierarchies and gendered subordination in Kandasamy and situated her work within an even greater Dalit feminist tradition that is unfriendly to the homogenizing discourses of womanhood. This literature has greatly contributed to the demonstration that the novel is not just an indication of personal trauma but also a critique of the socially instilled social stratification.

The other important mode of criticism has been on the role that the writing played as a process of resistance and recuperation. The fact that the narrator has assumed up to the writing has been interpreted by scholars as reclaiming subjectivity following systematic silencing. The metafictional nature of the text, its active role in the storytelling process, has been construed as permitting some form of agency that disrupts the lines of the abusive relationship. In this sense, the writing turns out to be both a survival technique and the means of the reconstruction of the discontinuous self. Whereas these types of readings are fruitful in their predictive ability of the transformative power of narrative, they are biased towards expressive resistance over other forms of embodied or ideological resistance.

Parallel to these, feminist literary criticism has also written about the text based on such paradigms as écriture féminine and gynocriticism and has also concentrated on how Kandasamy subverts the patriarchal language and narrative form. These methods emphasize the stylistic and linguistic experimentation of the novel, which suggests that the discontinuous and emotionally charged prose of the novel is a challenge to the accepted modes of representation and opens new spheres of female expression. Nevertheless, although these analyses are going to enhance our knowledge of the formal innovation of the novel, they usually stay in the domain of discourse and representation, leaving unexplored the material and ideological aspects of the female body in the novel.

Despite the rich literature that exists, a literature gap is vital. Much of the work under production remains tautly alert to violence, resistance and identity, yet still, within a paradigm that implicitly assumes that motherhood is absent or not at the heart of the concerns of the text. The reproduction of the narrative (especially its rejection) is hardly ever addressed as an important analytical category. As much as critics observe resistance of the main character, it is mostly framed in the context of speech, writing or escape rather than in the context of reproductive autonomy. This has led to a lack of theorization of the ideological pressure of motherhood as an institutional pressure.

This gap is particularly crucial when put into the framework of a broader feminist discourse of reproductive politics. The expectation of motherhood is a powerful control tool in patriarchal cultures, which not only affects the role of women but also their perceived worth and legitimacy. In When I Hit You, where the pressure to have a child was unspoken, the husband, desiring to have a child, shows motherhood as a continuation of the control over the female body. This aspect of the text, however, has not been sufficiently prefigured in the current criticism that is inclined to privilege more obvious types of violence as compared to less obvious types of reproductive coercion.

Further, despite the presence of revisionist feminist practices, albeit explicitly on the problem of motherhood, applied to canonical works, they have hardly been used to analyze the work of Kandasamy. The lack of motherhood in the story has been construed as an accident and not a willful and politically ripe choice.

This carelessness cuts down the interpretative possibilities of the text in that it fails to recognize refusal as a feminist instrument of critical cultural resistance that undermines the normative practices of womanhood.

The gap that the current paper attempts to address is to repackage motherhood, i.e. its rejection, as one of the main categories of analysis. The argument that the paper will make is not that When I Hit You is simply about resistance to violence, but that it actively criticizes the ideological framework that constitutes femininity as reproduction by making revisionist feminism talk with body politics, and ideas of refusal. In doing so, it adds to the already existing body of scholarship a twist to the story of survival into reproductive autonomy, thereby giving a more holistic view of the politics of the female body.

In this regard, the paper will be a part of the current feminist literary criticism, in that it will preempt an aspect of the text that has not been critically examined to date. It states that the deprivation of motherhood in the narrative of Kandasamy is not an incidental deficiency but a radical action, i.e. that which challenges the institutionalization of motherhood and re-defines feminist agency as the power not to have identities imposed upon them.

Methodology

This paper will focus on a qualitative, textual, theoretically informed research design to analyze the Meena Kandasamy book When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife through the critical prism of motherhood as burden and refusal. It is an interpretive approach, not empirical, as it is based on close reading and conceptual analysis. Since the main goal of the paper is to question the construction, imposition, and resistance of motherhood in the story, a qualitative literary method enables a sustained interaction with the language and structure of the text and ideological contradictions. The literary text is not just a narrative artefact but a place where gender, power, and embodiment discourses are produced and challenged.

Research Design

The publication will be a qualitative analysis in text form and will dwell on the theme of critical analysis of the passages chosen, the constitution of the stories and the plot lines of the novel. Special attention is paid to those moments when the narrator is bargaining with body sovereignty, when marital pressure occurs, and when the narrator is opposed to reproduction. They are not read in isolation but in the context of the larger narrative, and the analysis can follow the place of motherhood as an implication and a more narrowly controversial space.

No external data or reader-response theories are applied in the study; instead, close textual analysis is the primary method. It entails a conversation of narrative voice, language, silence and affective intensities in a bid to reveal ideological arrangements in the text. The absence of motherhood is analytically pertinent, and the absence is perceived as a calculated narrative and political performance and not the absence of context.

Analytical Framework

The analytical approach is interdisciplinary, as it uses revisionist feminism, feminist theory of motherhood, body politics, and intersectionality to interpret the text.

The study can explore how Kandasamy questions the naturalized cultural discourses to present motherhood as an extension of being a woman, through a revisionist feminist approach, which has been informed by Alicia Ostriker. This structure helps to read the text as an intervention that unveils and criticizes the ideological basis of maternal expectation.

The work is also informed by the difference between motherhood as lived experience and motherhood as institution, as Adrienne Rich puts it. This distinction is a significant one to explain why the story is a criticism not of maternal feeling itself, but of the institutional pressures that stress reproduction into a social need.

The process of female body regulation can be analysed through the concept of body politics that was brought up by such scholars as Judith Butler. The rejection of motherhood by the narrator is regarded as a disruption of the normal gender performance and this proves the instability of identities that are normally supposed to be natural.

The paper is also in contact with intersectional analysis, as it is based on Kimberlé Crenshaw, to describe the interaction between gendered oppression and social and cultural systems. This point of view allows the analysis to put in perspective the experience of the narrator within a broader frame of power and not to consider it as a unique or strictly individual case.

Together, the structures enable a stratified reading of the text where motherhood is not a certain category, but a negotiated and mediated one.

Justification of Approach

The qualitative, textual, and theoretical methodology is the option that can be explained by the character of the research problem. As it is proposed that the research aims to examine the way motherhood is portrayed, imposed, and challenged in a piece of literature, an interpretive method provides the depth and flexibility that it requires. The politics of reproduction and refusal would not be captured by quantitative or empirical means to capture the subtle ways in which language, narrative structure, and thematic emphasis express the politics of reproduction and refusal.

In addition, the combination of various theoretical approaches enables the study to go beyond the descriptive analysis and critically address the ideological aspects of the text. The approach to the analysis provides the possibility to be sensitive to both the symbolic and material aspects of motherhood because of the combination of revisionist feminism with body politics and intersectionality.

This strategy is especially suitable for research that seeks to predict refusal as a feminist agency. When I Hit You cannot be sufficiently examined within the frames of a superficial reading; it needs a method that would be able to read silence, negation, and resistance as significant narrative techniques. The selected approach, therefore, allows the paper to present a consistent and novel argument: that motherhood in the text of Kandasamy is not merely missing, but rather denied, and that the denial is a serious intervention into the modern feminist discourse.

By harmonising the intensive reading of the text and the strong theoretical background, the methodology will guarantee the analytical rigour and clarity of ideas, which shall be expected of a high-quality journal publication.

Analysis

When I Hit You Meena Kandasamy exterminates radically erases motherhood in its traditional sense of fulfilment and ethical plenitude and restores it within a framework of coercion, surveillance and embodied control. The absence of motherhood is not just absent in the story but is ideologically produced. Motherhood is introduced in the text as a pre-gained identity, but as a coming imposition, as something that is looming over the body of the narrator, and it delineates the boundaries of her oppression. Such intervention of the novel is not representational, but also revisionist: the cultural ideology that motherhood is an extension of being a woman is deconstructed by showing the conditions under which it is enforced.

Marital violence the narrator experiences can not be separated from the husband's desire to dominate her reproductive and physical freedom. His domination is more of the interior than of the exterior; it is more of the interior than the exterior of the potential reproduction. When the narrator tells us that she desires to own everything, my words, my thoughts and my body, she is speaking of the totalizing nature of the patriarchal possession. Notably, the drive of ownership is not merely embedded in the present body, but the future productivity of the body is foreshadowed. Motherhood, in this case, is a process that is used to stabilise and extend control. It is an irreversible vow, and the woman is tied to the edifice that enslaves her the more.

Such a dynamic reflects the distinction that Adrienne Rich makes between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood. It is not about maternal affect or relational care, but it is the institutional logic of reproduction that is transformed into a compulsion, which is the subject of the text by Kandasamy. This reasoning is unveiled when the narrator is unwilling to have a child, and it proves that what is culturally proclaimed as the inherent need is actually a structural demand in most instances. Motherhood is not merely a weight, though, with its material demand, but its ideological position, as a means of control.

When I Hit You does not allow the recuperation of motherhood as a place of empowerment, as do the narratives that reclaim motherhood as a place of empowerment. It does not attempt to re-evaluate maternal identity in the text; the issue is whether maternal identity has to be valued at all. The most important twist, here, is to shift feminist agency to that of endurance to refusal. The resistance of the narrator is not realised by means of the performance of some other types of motherhood, but the refusal to become a mother under pressure. This rejection is not a passive act or an accidental occurrence but a deliberate act of intervention in the normative script that identifies womanhood with reproduction, which is political in nature.

The approach to reading is supported by a womanist approach, which is inspired by Alice Walker and foresees survival as a basic moral issue. Yet even this scheme is made complex by Kandasamy throughout his text since the latter does not render the survival as maternal endurance. The narrator is not in favour of life through reproduction; she is in favour of life through resistance. Under this reconfiguration, care becomes self-centred, and self-preservation becomes an ethical value and not a deviation from the normative femininity. Motherhood renunciation, in this way, is not renunciation of relationality, but renunciation of forms of relationality, which involve the submission of the body.

An intersectional reading, which is inspired by Kimberle Crenshaw, expounds on this further, giving some explanation that the pressure to motherhood is not a demand, but a part of a bigger power structure. The status of the narrator as a part of a gendered and socially controlled institution of marriage makes her body subject to control and anticipation. Motherhood is a legitimising power that operates in this matrix to naturalise the extension of patriarchal power to the reproductive domain. Motherhood denial is not simply the disruption of a personal relationship, then; it is the disruption of a larger ideology which places female value in terms of potential reproductivity.

Motherhood could be viewed from the perspective of the performativity of Judith Butler as a norm, which is stabilised through repetition- an identity, which is continuously produced by the socially acceptable act. The narrator of Kandasamy breaks this repetition by refusing to act in the role that she was assigned. What is significant about such disruption is the fact that it shows that motherhood is not ontologically required, but rather an arbitrary and impositional norm. The narrator shows the frailty of the ideological order that depends on reproduction to survive by refusing to reproduce.

This denial is textually bound up with the voice assertion of the narrator. Her writing is a parallel place of resistance and, therefore, enables her to manifest a self that cannot be entirely subordinated to the role that is designated to her. It is, however, worth noting that this linguistic agency cannot be autonomous of bodily autonomy. The writing of writing and the denial of motherhood are the complementary instruments with the assistance of which the narrator can take control over her story and her body. In this regard, refusal functions at the same time at the discourse and embodiment level.

Motherhood in the text is not lived but a threatening spectre- one that threatens to trap the narrator even more. The future of bearing the baby is associated with more vulnerability than fulfilment, since the baby would just further put her in a system of abuse. Motherhood, in other words, is represented as a possible intensification of subjugation, instead of its overcoming. This is a foreseeable weight that stresses the urgency of refusal as a survival strategy.

The intervention Kandasamy is making is that she does not want to romanticise or recuperate motherhood in the feminist discourse. Instead, she demands its contingency, which discloses how it can be turned into an instrument of coercion when split off into autonomy and choice. The narrative critically

reevaluates motherhood, not challenging the emotional significance of motherhood in all cases, but forecasting the conditions under which it is imposed.

Ultimately, When I Hit You reinvents the concept of motherhood as a battlefield, whereby burden and refusal accompany each other. The power in the text is not brought about by motherhood, but through the possibility of rejecting the coercive imposition of motherhood. In this rejection, the narrator claims an agency that is opposing the patriarchal authority as well as the scripts of the culture that upholds it. Kandasamy goes on to take the revisionist feminist discourse a step further and shows that the most radical re-writing of motherhood is not in its redefinition, but instead in the right not to have it at all.

Conclusion

In the present paper, it has been argued that 'When I Hit You' by Meena Kandasamy compels a ruthless reevaluation of motherhood in the sense of taking it out of the context of presumed satisfaction to the context of constraint, control, and resistance. The text prefigures motherhood as an impending necessity, instead of a given identity, one that operates through the intimate mechanism of patriarchal domination involved in marriage. Now that the text of motherhood has been subjected to revisionist feminist analysis, the paper has shown that motherhood in the text is neither natural nor a natural extension of womanhood but an institutionally imposed requirement that attempts to stabilise gendered subordination by creating continuity. Making the narrator a non-member of this construction, then, is the most important location of feminist activity, and therefore, lack is a deliberate and politically crucial act.

The major contribution of this paper is that, instead of offering the critical focus on the more heavily researched domains of violence and narrative resistance, the field of theory that has not been researched in detail yet, i.e., reproductive refusal, is offered. Although the available literature has been fruitful in its examination of the way Kandasamy approaches the issue of marital abuse, linguistic reclamation and gendered silencing, it has nevertheless not been able to discuss the text in the context of how the text interacts with the idea of motherhood as an ideology. By foregrounding the burden of motherhood and employing refusal as a strategy, this work has expanded the interpretive possibilities of the novel, demonstrating that its intervention as a feminist one is not limited to the discovery of violence but also to the disruption of normal reproductive scripts. The paper will, in this manner, add to the current feminist literary criticism by introducing refusal as a term of criticism, in other words, by redefining agency not as a survival, sacrifice or compromise.

The macro implications of this argument are particularly significant in the Indian context, where motherhood still remains a highly influential cultural ideal which tends to be highly tied to the notion of duty, respect and female satisfaction. The story of Kandasamy defies this ideal because it reveals to the reader the stipulations that motherhood is imposed instead of willed, thus causing a disturbance to the ethics that are traditionally ascribed to it. In the meantime, the text resonates with an international feminist discourse that is increasingly conscious of the issues of reproductive justice, bodily sovereignty and non-maternity rights. In placing the denial of these discourses, the research underlines the importance of rethinking the notion of motherhood as a category of the past and politically mediated, as opposed to being a unitary and stable category. The image of the woman who does not want to have a child thereby obtains a critical value since she derails the normative fit of gender and reproduction, which is the foundation of cultural and institutional power.

In addition, the theoretical stances adopted by the paper on revisionist feminism, body politics, intersectionality and womanist thought highlight the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in the deconstructivism of the complex of maternal discourse. These views have been addressed to demonstrate that motherhood is not well-discussed outside of more general systems of power that circumscribe the experience of the body. The rejection of motherhood in When I Hit You can consequently be seen as not just a personal act, but also a slap to the relationship of power of patriarchy, social imperative and ideological subjugation that tries to establish and delimit female subjectivity.

Meanwhile, this research leaves a number of research opportunities for the future. The comparative analyses could also be performed on the reflection of motherhood and rejection of motherhood in the various literary traditions, specifically, South Asian, African, and diasporic. This type of work would further our insights into the way in which reproductive expectations are differently programmed in different cultural and historical contexts. The other possibly productive opportunity would be a more active role in the ongoing debates over reproductive technologies, surrogacy and neoliberal care economies, where the commodification and control of women's bodies take on new and complex forms. Besides, the connection between caste and class and reproductive autonomy in Indian literature can be further explored in the future through additional research, which will further broaden the intersectional aspect of the current research.

Lastly, When I Hit You demands a re-definition of motherhood as not a moral ideal but a place of conflict and negotiation. As Kandasamy foreshadows rejection as a valid and natural reaction to coercive orders, she expands the feminist discourse and reinvigorates the idea of what one might feel as agency. Such an intervention is important because it requires the most radical claim to subjectivity to be that of abandoning the roles that are conferred.

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